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SUBJECT: POLITICAL ISLAM IN BAHRAIN (PART I): SHARED
VALUES, DIFFERENT AGENDAS, OF ISLAMIC POLITICAL SOCIETIES

REF: 05 MANAMA 1580

Classified by DCM Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) Bahrain's three leading Islamic political societies mirror major trends in the country's religious life: Al Minbar, associated with the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood; Al Asala, a Sunni Salafi group; and Al Wifaq, representing the country's Shia community. These three societies represent the political views of the large majority of Bahraini citizens. Between them, Al Minbar and Al Asala hold 12 of the 40 seats in the elected Council of Representatives; Al Wifaq boycotted the 2002 parliamentary elections and is not represented in the Council. The two Sunni groups have a track record of working together on initiatives to introduce religious practices into daily life, many of which have proven to be controversial. They succeeded for the first time in having alcohol banned during Ramadan 2005 and, as a result of their vocal opposition, have reduced the availability of many cultural activities, in particular pop culture. A Salafi leader attributes the success of the religious societies to Muslims' "natural" support for Islamic politicians, and cited Hamas' recent victory as evidence. An Al Wifaq official ruled out forming an alliance with the Sunni Islamists, saying they have kept busy working on marginal matters while leaving critical national issues to the government. In the 2006 municipal and parliamentary elections, Islamists are expected to do well again, although voters will likely want them to focus on issues other than just religion. End Summary.

2. (C) This cable is the first in a three-part series of reports covering political Islam in Bahrain. Part I discusses the three leading Islamic political societies and their agendas; Part II reports the views of competing political societies and politicians on the Islamist agenda; and Part III describes the reactions of civil society, business people, and liberals in the country.

Islamists on Both Sides of Sectarian Divide

3. (C) The three leading Islamic political societies in Bahrain mirror the major trends in the country's religious life. The Minbar Islamic Society (Al Minbar) represents conservative Sunnis associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. The Al Asala Society is the political arm of the Islamic Education charitable organization (Al Tarbiya Al Islamiya), a Sunni Salafi group that adheres to the strict, literal interpretation of Islamic scriptures most closely associated with the dominant religious trend in Saudi Arabia. Al Wifaq is the leading Shia organization. There are several non-religious-based political societies, such as Al Waad, with roots in the communist/socialist movements of the 1970s, and Al Mithaq, a non-sectarian liberal group. But to a great extent, Al Minbar, Al Asala, and Al Wifaq represent the political views of the large majority of Bahrainis.

4. (C) Some 30 percent of Bahraini citizens are Sunni and 70 percent are Shia. (There is a very small number of Christian and Jewish citizens as well.) The Sunni groups, the traditional base of support for the Sunni ruling family (the Al Khalifas), strongly backed King Hamad's reform process, launched shortly after he ascended to the throne in 1999. They enthusiastically supported the 2001 referendum on the National Action Charter and, following the issuance of the 2002 constitution, organized politically and ran candidates in the 2002 municipal and parliamentary elections. While the Shia also voted overwhelmingly in favor of the National Action Charter, many heeded Al Wifaq's call to boycott the political system to protest the 2002 constitution, which they believe significantly scaled back the political freedoms promised in the Charter. As a result, Shia Islamists did not stand for parliamentary elections in 2002. (Note: They participated in the municipal elections on the grounds that doing so did not imply acceptance of the constitution which, in fact, is silent on the municipal councils.) The seven members of the Shia Islamic bloc in parliament are not

associated with Al Wifaq.

Sunni Islamists Largest, Most Active Bloc in Parliament

15. (C) Al Minbar is Bahrain's Muslim Brotherhood and, in the local context, the group is relatively moderate and cooperates with the government and ruling family. It is the political wing of the Al Islah charity society. The Al Minbar bloc in the elected lower house of parliament, the Council of Representatives (COR), is composed of seven MPs (out of a total of 40) and is led by physician Dr. Salah Ali. In his personal capacity, Ali has promoted the rights of women and children, having drafted a bill on childhood education and proposed the establishment of family counseling centers. Ali has participated in many activities organized and sponsored by the MEPI-funded National Democratic Institute (NDI) democracy promotion project. Ali's moderate image and actions are in contrast with spokesman Shaikh Mohammed Khalid, who is virulently anti-American and in the forefront of protesting the detention of Bahraini citizens at Guantanamo and the July 2004 arrest of a terror cell accused of plotting attacks in the Kingdom.

16. (C) Al Asala represents the Salafi trend in Sunni Islam, which adheres to a strict, literal interpretation of Koranic and Hadith scriptures. Al Asala is the political wing of the Islamic Education charity society, from which it receives funding. The Al Asala bloc in the COR has five members and is currently led by Ghanem Al Boanain. Shaikh Adel Al Moawada, the COR's second deputy chair, had been the head of the bloc until the end of 2005, when Al Boanain took over the leadership. Al Moawada has said publicly that his bloc is focused on three main goals: increasing the standard of living; supporting institutions that will improve political, social, and economic stability; and enhancing financial and administrative oversight.

Shia Islamists Outside the System

17. (C) Al Wifaq is the country's largest Shia political group. Its spiritual leader is prominent cleric Shaikh Issa Qassem, who is said to follow both Ayatollah Khamenei and Ayatollah Sistani as "marjaeeya," or religious references. Al Wifaq boycotted the 2002 parliamentary elections on the grounds that the 2002 constitution is illegitimate, and so it has no representation in the COR. It did, however, contest the 2002 municipal elections and several Al Wifaq members sit on the five 10-member municipal councils. While still an opposition group, Al Wifaq registered with the government as a political society under the 2005 Political Societies Law and appears to be moving toward a decision to participate in the October 2006 parliamentary elections.

Legislating Piety

18. (C) The two Sunni Islamist political societies have a track record of working together on issues related to raising the profile of religious practices in daily life, many of which have proven to be controversial. In 2004, Al Moawada publicly denounced a scheduled concert by Lebanese pop singer Nancy Ajram in the government-owned exhibition center. Others joined in, leading to high-volume complaints about the decline in morals of Bahraini youth. The controversy resulted in a protest and riot by Shia youth outside the concert venue. Since this incident, the usual range of available cultural activities has been reduced, in particular Arab pop culture. (Note: There has been a recent upswing in cultural activities, including the USG-sponsored performance of hip-hop band Opus Akoben.) Also in 2004, then-Minister of Information Nabil Al Hamer gave his approval for an Arabic satellite network to stage a reality television show called "Big Brother" in Bahrain. Al Asala and Al Minbar decried the presence of young men and women living together in the same house despite that, in deference to Gulf sensibilities, the men and women lived in separate units in a duplex house. Just days after filming started, "Big Brother" closed shop as a result of massive demonstrations and resumed shooting in Dubai.

19. (C) In other areas, the Sunni Islamists have used the legislative tools available to pressure the government on social policy. Bahrain is famous (or infamous) in the Gulf region for the availability of alcohol, night clubs and other entertainment diversions. During Ramadan 2005, which lasted from early October to early November, the government for the first time banned alcohol from the restaurants and bars of five-star hotels. Per reftel, Minister of Information (and Minister of State for Foreign Affairs) Mohammed Abdul Ghaffar, in his capacity as head of the tourism directorate at the Information Ministry, issued an early October

instruction to hotels to stop serving alcohol. Compliance was spotty at first but by mid-month all hotels had implemented the order following threats of closure. Those that did not stop serving alcohol immediately were forced to keep some (but not all) of their restaurants and bars closed during the three-day Eid Al Fitr holiday that immediately followed Ramadan.

Tourism Directorate Clamps Down

110. (C) Abdul Ghaffar told the Ambassador that the Ministry had been under pressure for two years from MPs opposed to alcohol being served during Ramadan. The MPs claimed that 22 COR deputies would sign a petition demanding that Abdul Ghaffar appear before parliament to answer questions on the subject. In response to the initial weak implementation of the ban, the MPs demanded that as a penalty, those hotels' liquor licenses be suspended for up to three months. The Eid closure was a compromise, but the episode sent a strong warning to hotel owners and operators.

111. (C) In a separate incident, the Tourism Directorate canceled a permit it had already issued to a restaurant called Al Teatro, located inside a chic local shopping mall, to present performances by local and regional singers and musicians. The restaurant's owner complained that his business plan depended on the ability to stage the shows, and he could not generate sufficient income without attracting the patrons who would pay to attend the performances. The restaurant does not have, and did not seek, a liquor license. Due to the action of the Tourism Directorate, the owner said publicly that he expects to be forced to close the restaurant on business grounds.

112. (C) Al Minbar and Al Asala have used a parliamentary device called an "iqtirah bi raghba," or desired proposal (similar to a "Sense of the Congress" resolution), to influence government policy. They submitted, and the COR approved, proposals to force the closure of all business establishments for two hours at the time of Friday prayers, and to segregate the sexes at the University of Bahrain classes. Most recently, in early February, MP Ali Mattar of Al Asala proposed that Bahrain's penal code be amended to allow the amputation of a hand of a convicted thief. The proposal was referred to a committee for discussion.

Salafis Support King, Demonstrate Loyalty

113. (C) In a January 29 meeting, Al Moawada told EmbOffs that Al Asala strongly supports the King's democratic reform agenda. He cited the King's greatest accomplishment as stabilizing the country by rooting reform deeply in society. That said, change should come slowly, to give both the rulers and the people time to adjust to new circumstances. Reformers need to make clear to the ruler that "they do not want his chair," but that they are working on behalf of the people. The ruler's position in the chair is stronger when the people have their rights.

114. (C) Al Moawada said that the Salafis originally did not want to become involved in politics, but they felt they could not sit on the fence and allow others to promote their agendas at the expense of that of the Salafis. As for their electoral success, Al Moawada said that people naturally choose Islam when it is one of the options. Hamas' recent success is proof of the attraction of Islam to voters. Al Asala decided to focus its legislative energy on the immediate needs of the people rather than more abstract issues such as constitutional reform.

115. (C) On the bloc's promotion of an Islamic agenda, Al Moawada said that he and his colleagues have been criticized by constituents for not fighting hard enough to ban alcohol entirely in Bahrain. He pressured the government to force hotels to stop serving alcohol during Ramadan because this is a "matter of respect" for Islam and Muslims, similar to the Bahraini law requiring that restaurants close during the fasting hours. He said he had been surprised to learn that some hotels had been able to serve alcohol during previous Ramadans; he had mistakenly assumed the government already banned alcohol during the holy month.

Total Alcohol Ban Not Realistic

116. (C) Al Moawada said Al Asala had not aggressively pursued a total ban on alcohol because of the potential negative impact on the economy. He said there is an Arabic expression which states that, if by attacking one problem, you cause an even larger problem, you should learn to live with the original situation. In Al Asala's view, it is

preferable to limit the availability of and access to alcohol and to lower its profile in the country rather than harm the economy. In response to a question, Al Moawada said that he welcomed Al Wifaq's possible entry to the COR. He expects that Al Wifaq, as an Islamic party, will support Al Asala's religious-based activities.

17. (C) Al Moawada's colleague in Al Asala and current head of the bloc Ghanem Al Boanain told the DCM that Al Asala would not nominate women to run for parliament and it would not support the candidacy of women from other blocs. In contrast, Al Minbar intends to nominate women - most likely two - for seats in the COR. Bloc member Dr. Ali Ahmed said publicly that Al Minbar "supports women's empowerment and wants to field the best women who can win." Ahmed said, "We believe that having a female head of state is against religious regulations, but any post below that is open to them." He asserted that "granting women their political rights is not against Islamic precepts. They should be motivated to achieve their aspirations and contribute to the Kingdom's development."

Deep Shia Mistrust of Sunni Islamists

18. (C) In a separate January 23 conversation, Al Wifaq Consultative (Shura) Council member Nizar Al Qari told EmbOffs that Al Wifaq "will never" form an alliance with the Sunni Islamic societies. Shia mistrust of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis is deeply rooted. Al Qari said (with some melodrama), "If one of them found me in the desert, he might kill me" as an infidel. The social causes pursued by Al Minbar and Al Asala "are an obstacle to progress, a distraction from the important issues facing Bahraini society." While Al Wifaq is an Islamist party that takes guidance from senior Shia clerics, it rejects a focus on religious issues, which it considers to be a waste of parliament's time and energy. Al Qari said that he hopes to diminish and eventually remove the influence of Shia clerics on Al Wifaq's politics. He accepts them as spiritual leaders but not as politicians.

19. (C) In Al Qari's view, parliament should focus on bread and butter issues that impact the daily lives of Bahraini citizens. He considers these to be jobs, housing, health care, land use and zoning, small and micro enterprise development, and corruption. He criticizes COR deputies for keeping busy with marginal issues while allowing the government to do what it pleases on important national issues. He complained that for the Sunni Islamists, Saudi Arabia is the model. They talk about "imposing respect" for Muslims by enacting laws legislating religious principles, but "respect cannot be imposed, it must be earned," Al Qari said. The Sunni Islamists, he complained, represent the "face of the Taliban" in Bahrain.

20. (C) Al Qari said that if Al Wifaq decides to participate in the elections, it will nominate several women as candidates. He noted that four women stood for election to Al Wifaq's Shura Council, and three won. Many women with ties to Al Wifaq are benefiting from training in election campaigns being offered in Bahrain and he expects at least some to be successful in the elections.

Comment

21. (C) Bahrainis, like most GCC citizens, are religiously conservative. In contrast, however, with most of their Gulf brethren, they have always had an outwardly focused, open-minded perspective, perhaps because of their traditional reliance upon trade. While they tend to adhere closely to their Islamic beliefs and practices, many feel uncomfortable with the Islamists' preference for legislating piety. Because of the sectarian divide, the large majority of Bahrainis object in principle to Sunni politicians attempts to impose their interpretation of Islam and society on all citizens. However, as Al Moawada says, people tend to vote for Islam when it is one of the options, and Islamist candidates, both Sunni and Shia, are expected to do well in the upcoming parliamentary elections. But, if presented with the choice, voters are likely to support Islamist candidates who focus on cutting edge national issues rather than simply the introduction of religion into public life.

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